

The Church's prayer for Sunday 19th December

Eternal God,
as Mary waited for the birth of your Son,
so we wait for his coming in glory;
bring us through the birth pangs of this present age
to see, with her, our great salvation
in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Bible Readings and Reflection for Sunday 19th December

A reading from Micah 5:2-5

But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah,
who are one of the little clans of Judah,
from you shall come forth for me
one who is to rule in Israel,
whose origin is from of old,
from ancient days.
Therefore he shall give them up until the time
when she who is in labour has brought forth;
then the rest of his kindred shall return
to the people of Israel.
And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord,
in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God.
And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great
to the ends of the earth;
and he shall be the one of peace.
If the Assyrians come into our land
and tread upon our soil,
we will raise against them seven shepherds
and eight installed as rulers.

A Gospel reading from Luke 1:39-45

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leapt in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.'

A reflection from Sue Nelms, Licensed Lay Minister

Our gospel reading this morning is the account of a brief encounter between two women. It may seem like a funny little episode, just a few verses and easily jumped over, but what can we learn from it?



There is a television programme where people have to look at a picture and link a catchphrase to it. Much of the time the poor contestants look bemused and struggle for words, which leads to the host saying several times throughout a programme 'Just say what you see.' This morning I am going to try and do just that, say what I see.

Anyone who doesn't think that God enjoys his creation and creating, may not have seen the joy expressed in the image in this morning's reading from Luke's gospel. On one hand, we have Elizabeth, about five months into what would be called a geriatric pregnancy by today's medical profession because she was so old. On the other hand, we have Mary, a young woman, newly pregnant with her whole life before her. And these two women, kinswomen, have come together to explore the joy of this shared experience of first-time pregnancy.

Their lives might not have been easy; after all pregnancy comes with all sorts of challenges and side-effects and giving birth can be scary, painful and even dangerous, but the whole experience of pregnancy and birth is special and unique to each individual woman. What we don't see, but what I think was definitely there, was a smiling creator God with his arms around both women, rejoicing in the joy that they are sharing in his plan as they nurture the new lives they carry within them.

If you google images of this event, you will find plenty of images of two equally pregnant women gently exploring each other's swelling bellies. But it can't in reality have been like that. Elizabeth was at least five months pregnant when the newly pregnant Mary came rushing to visit so soon after the angel Gabriel's visit.

Elizabeth lived in what was known as the Judean hills, south of Jerusalem, whereas Mary lived in Nazareth, about 80 miles away. Mary was a fit and healthy young woman who would probably have managed to walk about 20 miles a day so potentially she could have been with Elizabeth four or five days after her encounter with the angel Gabriel.

Let's look a bit more closely at these two women. First, we have Elizabeth, descended from Aaron, the brother of Moses, married to a priest, Zechariah, but potentially a priestly person in her own right. She was an older woman who lived her life according to God's rules and commandments. This was important to understand because in the first century, many priests had been discredited because they were corrupt and self-interested. Elizabeth and her husband Zechariah were not like that; they were devout, focused on God.

Elizabeth's life had not been easy. Some people considered her a failure because she had no children. She was not the first woman in the Bible who had experienced fertility problems – Sarah, mother of Isaac, Manoah, mother of Samson and Hannah, mother of Samuel might also spring to mind.

Discovering that she was finally pregnant when in her mind she was too old must have aroused all sorts of emotions for Elizabeth. I remember that my mother refused to leave the house when she became pregnant with my brother in her late forties. Elizabeth spent five months in seclusion, possibly reflecting on the raw pain and perceived disgrace that she



had lived with for so long, taking time to replace it with joy and acceptance of God's recognition. Five months reflecting with God, so that when Mary arrives to visit, Elizabeth is excited because perhaps at that moment she began to understand God's plan and how Mary was so blessed.

Mary was at the other end of the spectrum. She was a young woman, a virgin, eagerly looking forward to marrying a man called Joseph when the angel Gabriel visited and told her that she had been chosen to be the mother of God's own son. Her response had been 'Here I am – let it be' or words to that effect, showing a readiness to trust in God and accept his role for her.

The angel had then told Mary about Elizabeth's pregnancy, but we don't actually know why Mary set out to see Elizabeth so quickly. She probably would not already have known about it with Zechariah being unable to speak and Elizabeth in her five months of seclusion, so was Mary perhaps checking out the situation for herself? Did she want to learn what she could from Elizabeth's experience? Perhaps she was looking for a safe place in which to get her head around her own situation? Interestingly she also doesn't just wander off to visit Elizabeth – she does it 'with haste', in a hurry, eagerly.

The actual moment of meeting, the subject of today's reading, is simply beautiful. When Elizabeth heard Mary's voice, the baby she was carrying, the future John the Baptist, jumped in her womb. People talk about baby kicks feeling like a butterfly gently flapping its wings but as babies grow the kicks get stronger and sometimes their vigour really does take your breath away. In today's reading Elizabeth described it as her baby leaping for joy. The same verse in the Message translation reads 'The babe in my womb skipped like a lamb for sheer joy'. The image of lambs skipping for joy in spring is such a lovely one; we see sheer freedom and exuberance as they skip and gambol about with such energy and enthusiasm.

As I reflected on the image of the two women meeting, I thought with even more wonder of the idea of a baby in the womb of around 5 months' gestation recognizing the identity of another baby in the womb who was possibly not much bigger than a full stop when they met. They couldn't see each other and yet John knew. This is in direct contrast to later in their lives, when so many people could not recognize the identity of the Messiah in the grown-up Jesus.

Elizabeth herself was also filled with the Holy Spirit and greeted Mary accordingly. She called Mary blessed and again she called Mary's baby blessed. Perhaps this was the product of her thinking during the five months she spent in seclusion, but her words were significant. Her words will have confirmed for Mary everything the angel Gabriel had said to her about Elizabeth's pregnancy. In addition, Elizabeth's awareness of Mary's own pregnancy and all that it signified will also have been confirmation for Mary of everything the angel said to her about God's blessing on her.

So much emotion; positive, happy emotion but of course today we live with the benefit of hindsight, and we know that both of those babies met a horrific death. John was beheaded by Herod Antipas. Jesus was crucified.



We don't know whether Elizabeth lived to be aware of how her son was killed, but we do know that Mary was present at the foot of the cross when her son was crucified, with the pain of that day being such a contrast to the joy in today's reading.

These two women teach us something special about God's love for us. Whilst there is a sense of overwhelming joy at their meeting, there is also something else; a sense of acceptance, peace; not peace and quiet, but the deeper peace of God, shalom. Shalom is one of the key words and images in the Bible for salvation. Shalom experienced is multidimensional, complete well-being - physical, psychological, social, and spiritual; it flows from all of one's relationships being put right - with God, with(in) oneself, and with others.

As Paul wrote in his letter to the Colossians, God is reconciling all things to himself through Christ (Colossians 1:20). In our reading from Luke's gospel this morning we get a visual interpretation of the beginning of that process.

God is working his purpose out to quote a well-known hymn. God has a plan, even if we can't necessarily see or understand what it is. God doesn't want to do it on his own, however. He wants to do it with us, and if we are prepared to be a part of that plan, God can help us to experience the peace or shalom that only He can give us, even in those times when our lives feel incredibly difficult. The peace that flows from all our relationships being put right; with God, within ourselves and with others.

May the peace of the Lord be with you this morning. Amen.